LAOCOON'S MASK

Abdulhalim Durma

“In Seljuk art, which some critics have viewed as having ended prematurely without fully developing its identity, we see abstract concepts expressed within a philosophical unity that never repeats itself, much like the creator's work in the universe. We fail to grasp its depth and, with the naivety of ignorance, exclaim in astonishment, "They've made stones speak!" I experienced this firsthand on the road to Divriği in ancient times. While my car broke down, alone and helpless, far from others, the state of mind I experienced was inexplicably incapable of grasping this perfection. Before me was a complex web of meaning, difficult to comprehend.

“However, what captivated me during my bicycle journeys in my youth was art's flawless expression of what exists. The ancient Greek artist breathed not only flesh and bone into marble or bronze, but also character and emotion, pain and passion. An ordinary person might experience these emotions with such purity and striking intensity in daily life, but expressing them is almost impossible. As you know, art distills emotion and presents it to us. The best parts of nature are combined with the perfection of imitation to create the ideal human form. The "truth" here is the "truth of the ideal" beyond what is visible. To put it exaggeratedly, even in real life we cannot express our emotions as perfectly as they are reflected in Greek art.

I cannot say that it was easy to penetrate the spirit of our elderly friend's comparison of civilizations, which blended philosophy with art. However, I wondered whether his awareness of intellectual difference, evident in his use of the phrase "even we," contradicted his inherent humility. Yet, he continued speaking as if to himself, without any concern for clarity.

“Whatever the reason, his tense body and the contorted expression on his face evoked the embodiment of suffering, of horror and helplessness. Much like the terrifying expressions found in the depictions of mythological events on the friezes of ancient Greek architecture, where emotions are almost tangible, pushing the boundaries of aesthetics.

“While the words "torment of the grave," which in our culture imply the boundless violence of its paralyzing effect but are identified with hell as a soulless tool of fear, lack any aesthetic connotation, there is no doubt that in antiquity, a period existed where tragedy reached its peak with mythological elements dedicated solely to this.

Frankly, I was having trouble making the connections. There's a richness of expression, I admit... but what was it that made it so difficult to understand? I thought my friends were having the same problem, judging by the unconsciously furrowed brows on their faces as they listened intently. Our elderly friend was beating around the bush, touching on the subject here and there; each sentence, though seemingly detached from the center, was subtly connected to the main point. This circuitous narrative was like a series of landmarks erected around the topic: it didn't directly point to the goal, but hinted at where the path would lead. While we all waited impatiently, these side signs were actually silent harbingers of the bigger picture.

“When the person next to him moved to the foreground during the visual communication, he began to follow the conversation from a little behind, in less than half of the screen, as a viewer. However, without realizing how much time had passed, when I focused on him for a moment, I realized with horror that the expression on his face, which wasn't looking at the screen, evoked ancient Greek masks. An intense physiological and psychological emotion... simply pain. The eternal suffering reflected in the face of Lao Coón or Medea... the tragic hellish torture in Dante's Comedy...An unbearable torment of intense

intensity, a self-centered mental imprisonment that closes all doors to the outside world and is only inwardly focused. One might think that only a strong narcotic could bring him into life as a viewer. But what if the cause of this unbearable pain is the narcotic itself?!

I caught him! It's clear that today's topic is drugs. However, amidst so many pressing social issues, I was genuinely curious about the extent of what our elderly friend would say about 'addiction and drug use'. But, as if he had read my mind, he was about to talk about how the problem isn't even considered a 'problem'.

“At the beginning of a long dental treatment, I reminded the doctor of my advanced age and the serious illness I had suffered. After that, I completely entrusted myself to his expertise. I confess, I remember being quite nervous a couple of times, but during months of treatment, I became completely accustomed to the needle. Like a superhero, almost insensitive to pain. Once, I couldn't count the number of injections he gave me one after another, but when I left him with the cotton he stuffed in my mouth and the prescription he handed me, and headed home through the city, I couldn't understand the reason for people's watchful eyes at first. I couldn't make sense of the pharmacist's stares either, even though I hadn't spoken to him. Hours later, with the return of my lost ability to speak, I realized that the local anesthetic had exceeded its limits.

“From the outside, it seems as if there is a kind of inaction, a spiral of collective silence, a state of "turning a blind eye" against a huge fire that seems to be ignoring it. However, the recent '100-Day Operation' of the Ministry of Interior clearly reveals the magnitude of the drug and smuggling problem in the country, the depth of the supply-demand chain, and the global/local dimensions reached by organized crime networks.

I confess, I had heard about this ‘100-Day Operation’, but for some reason, I hadn’t paid much attention to it. Because

major scandals, tragedies, or major transformations come one after another, it’s become natural that the event doesn’t leave a lasting mark on memory, due to the hourly news and information fatigue. And we all activate a collective “forgetting” mechanism. Given how close we had been to our elderly professor for so long, and therefore, considering how predictable it was for us, I could foresee that he would delve into the history of the subject.

“This subject is as old as human history, a vast ocean where medicine, politics, and commerce intersect, with ties to the rise and fall of civilizations. For thousands of years, humanity used plants like opium poppy, coca leaf, and hemp directly from nature. Sumerian tablets refer to opium poppy as the "Plant of Joy." In sacred Hindu texts, hemp is considered one of the "Five Sacred Plants" given to humanity to relieve anxieties. In Egypt, Rome, and the Ottoman Empire, opium was the cornerstone of religious ceremonies, mystical rituals, and, most importantly, surgical procedures and painkillers. During these periods, "addiction" was not seen as a social crime or pathology in the modern sense. The substance was considered a powerful source of healing offered by nature, but when used excessively, it was seen as a "death that induces sleep."

“Hasan Sabbah’s fanatical followers were scorned in the East with the word ‘intoxicated followers’, while in the West they were known as ‘assassins’ for their daring actions.”

Then he moved to a realm of familiar names and where being ignored was preferred. There, speaking seems as if it were disrespecting history; yet this silence is the most refined narcotic for ignoring the ailments of our time.

“During his years as a prince, Bayezid II, who lived in Amasya, was closely involved with the cultural and artistic circles of the time. Historical sources record that he was influenced by some statesmen and poets around him and showed a fondness for substances such as opium and hashish. It is even said that his

father, Mehmed the Conqueror, was aware of this and issued harsh warnings. Furthermore, one of the most critical, concrete, and dramatic accusations behind the fall from grace and escape of Sinan Pasha, the author of Tazarruname, is that he introduced Prince Bayezid to these intoxicating substances or turned a blind eye to this environment. The reign of Murad IV is also noteworthy for the harsh measures taken against drugs and intoxicating substances because they were seen as a threat to authority. However, when such a danger was not generally perceived, taverns, which were places of drug dealing, were ignored. Also, the word 'swamp' (batakhane)..." both because of its powerful descriptive power in language, it was frequently used in literary works and had reached considerable frequency as a social reality, especially in the port and entertainment districts of the capital.

For some reason, the expression on the face of a friend who had recently joined the group caught my attention because it was only subtly different from the others, suggesting a psychological disorder. But I didn't dwell on it at the time. Our elderly friend, meanwhile, continued with his 'notes on the history of comparative problems'.

“However, in those centuries, opium dens in China were divided into classes within themselves. While the luxurious places frequented by wealthy merchants and elites offered fine silk beds, beautiful music, and specially processed opium; the places where the workers went were dark cells, resembling the dens of iniquity of the Ottoman era, full of filth, where people were crammed together. By the 20th century, in a way never seen before in history, a significant portion of the population of China, the "Sick Man of Asia," was addicted to opium.

After these journeys across different centuries and geographies, the narrative suddenly ceased to be the incredibly tragic story of *Cathay* and unexpectedly turned into the monograph of a commercial company.

“When British merchant ships began to operate more effectively in the oceans, especially focusing on expeditions to India, seafaring merchants banded together to increase their capital and sought privileges from Queen Elizabeth I of England. Finally, in 1600, they succeeded in obtaining these privileges for the East India Company, which they founded with 250 partners. Emerging as a trade monopoly in East and Southeast Asia, the company gradually became a political entity. From the beginning of the 18th century to the middle of the 19th century, it was used as an instrument of British imperialism. Its activities in China in the 19th century were instrumental in spreading British influence to China. The East India Company, or EIC, was "the harsh face of British imperial authority." Its managers and shareholders amassed enormous wealth. Conversely, India became even poorer. Much more than a trading company, the EIC eventually became a state within a state, and even an empire within an empire.” It transformed into a creature baring the teeth of a kind of ‘wild capitalism’ that is accountable to no one but the empire and its shareholders.

And then, the main issue. History's reckoning with conscience. A chain of events that one can hardly believe...

“The British banned food production in India’s most fertile lands and forced peasants to cultivate only opium. This triggered tragic famines that cast a shadow of death over the villages; millions died of starvation. Meanwhile, drugs processed in massive facilities were smuggled into China by ship. In short, the infamous Opium Wars, which led to China’s downfall, were actually the result of a poison trade conducted by the British through India. China was forced to sign humiliating treaties, control of Hong Kong passed to the British, and the opium trade was fully legalized. This period is known in Chinese history as the “Hundred Years of Shame.”

“The company managed India like a commercial enterprise, occupying territories with its own private army and conducting the opium trade. However, this greed and brutal rule ultimately

led to its own downfall. Indian soldiers in the company's army launched a massive rebellion against heavy exploitation and cultural disrespect. The rebellion was brutally suppressed, but the British Crown realized that leaving the administration of an entire subcontinent in the hands of a commercial company was now too risky. The British Parliament stripped the company of all political and military authority over India. India was placed directly under the authority of Queen Victoria of England. The company was reduced to a dysfunctional shell and officially dissolved completely."

"Interestingly, it left a profound and transformative mark on Adam Smith and Karl Marx, two of the most important cornerstones of modern economic thought. It was more than just an ordinary commercial enterprise; it was a colossal "corporate-state" with its own army, mint, and judicial system. This extraordinary structure and colonial practices in India became one of the greatest concrete laboratories that both thinkers used to shape their own theories, namely, free-market capitalism and historical materialism/scientific socialism. However, it could be said that for 150 years the British public has been uncomfortable with the spirit of the corporation and has ignored it."

This situation reminded me of the existence of societies, like the German and Japanese peoples, that are victims of a mentality that has to come to terms with itself after World War II. The didactic effect of the conversation, which our elderly friend had monopolized, was not felt because of the interesting nature of the subject. But when I noticed that the thoughtful expression on our new friend's face, which had just caught my attention, continued, it occurred to me that he might have a problem related to the topic of the day.

"Popular details of narcotic history do indeed contain absurd, tragicomic, and ironic stories, like this company. The making of rope and fabric from hemp fibers dates back to humanity's earliest agricultural activities. However, its use for medicinal

purposes was documented in the Chinese Emperor Shen Nung's medicinal guide in 2700 BC. Peoples of Asia and the Middle East have long since experienced the intoxicating effects of opium, the smoke of hemp, and the euphoria of alcohol, even incorporating them into their mythology and medical books. The Inca people chewed coca leaves for centuries in the high-altitude Andes Mountains to combat hunger, fatigue, and lack of oxygen. Many substances that are "absolutely forbidden" today were used in the past as cough syrup, miracle cures, or strategic fuel in major wars.

With his final words, our elderly friend moved from tragic to tragicomic examples, which would make it difficult for us to avoid laughing for ethical reasons.

“In 1898, the German pharmaceutical giant Bayer committed one of the greatest ironies in medical history. A company chemist, while searching for a painkiller stronger than morphine, synthesized a compound. When workers who tested the drug in the lab said they felt "like heroes," the drug was trademarked as Heroin. Thus, this wordplay between heroism and disaster reflected an ironic combination of heroism and downfall, with tragedy hidden in the shadow of heroism.

“Bayer marketed heroin worldwide as a safe, non-addictive cough syrup, asthma and painkiller. It was even prescribed to treat the morphine addiction that was common at the time. It was soon realized that the drug was far more deadly than morphine and caused far more addiction. Bayer was forced to cease heroin production in 1913.

The examples continued with seemingly modest and innocent pleasures. As seen in all advertisements, the target was Coca-Cola, the popular carbonated beverage of today, which exploits the human need for "belonging and pleasure".

“It was originally invented as a medicine by a pharmacist in 1886. The pharmacist, who was wounded in the American Civil War and addicted to morphine, was looking for a formula to overcome his addiction. The first formula consisted of a mixture of coca tree leaf extract and kola nuts, a source of caffeine. This is where its name comes from. In its early years, this drink was sold by the glass as a "medical tonic" that was good for headaches, depression, fatigue, and sexual impotence. As the dangers of cocaine and legal pressures increased, the company removed the active cocaine from the formula in 1903. Today, Coca-Cola still uses coca leaves, but these leaves are first completely purged of cocaine.

It's strange. Though I didn't want to admit it, my thoughts showed that I was imitating the teacher perfectly. Then, ironically, life took a turn. Bottles were opened for a meaningful protest. As the cola spilled onto the ground, the weight of the slogans lessened. The aim was to expose the dirty face of commerce and politics; the result was shoes slipping and falling on a sticky surface. The liquid, expected to be a symbol of resistance, turned into a humorous spectacle in itself. Thus, the meaningful action collided with an absurd outcome: the political message was drowned in the foam. However, the dark humor continued.

“World War II was not just a war of armies, but also of chemical laboratories. States distributed drugs en masse to enable soldiers to fight for days without sleep, without hunger, and without fear.

“The German army distributed a methamphetamine-based pill to its soldiers, pilots, and tank crews in 1939 and 1940. The secret behind the Blitzkrieg strategy, which wiped France off the map in just a few weeks, was the German soldiers who, thanks to this pill, advanced relentlessly for 72 hours without sleeping. Among the soldiers, these pills were called "Tank Chocolate" or "Stuka Pills." The soldiers identified these drugs, which gave them superhuman focus, speed, and fearlessness,

with the Stuka aircraft, the most deadly, fastest, and most aggressive weapon of the time. Just as the Stuka plane descended from the sky with aggressive and unstoppable force, these pills gave pilots the same aggressive energy.

“England and the United States, having deciphered the secret of the Nazis’ inexhaustible energy, were no exception. Allied armies distributed hundreds of millions of doses of these pills to their soldiers, especially their pilots flying at night.

“In the early years of the war, pharmaceutical factories were transformed into virtual drug laboratories by military orders. Medical reports clearly show how intensely soldiers consumed these substances. During the occupation of France, it was measured that units using these pills marched and drove tanks an average of 35 kilometers a day for 3 days and 3 nights without sleeping or stopping.”

So, what happened next? There had to be a price to pay, hadn't there? Undoubtedly, there were consequences that weren't easy to explain. Now, the scene was nothing but pure tragedy, devoid of any humor.

“When the war ended, hundreds of thousands of surviving soldiers on both sides were left with severe psychosis, paranoia, heart failure, and severe drug addiction. While the pills gave a false sense of strength in the short term, they caused permanent, horrific destruction in the bodies and minds of the soldiers. The drugs completely shut down the body's natural alarm system. Because the soldiers didn't feel tired, they pushed their biological limits to the extreme. Overdoses and physical exertion caused pulse and blood pressure to rise to lethal levels, leading to heart attacks and brain hemorrhages at a young age. These pills raised body temperature uncontrollably. Many soldiers who died suddenly from organ failure on the front lines had false diagnoses written on their death certificates.”

“When the effects of the pill wore off, soldiers would fall into a deep, coma-like sleep lasting between 24 and 48 hours. Because they couldn’t be awakened during this time, they were easily targeted on the battlefield. Regular use completely destroyed the balance of dopamine and serotonin in the brain. This led to mental breakdowns that made it impossible to maintain military discipline in the armies. Soldiers began to see enemies that weren’t there. Cases of soldiers firing on their own comrades or superiors were reported.

Their life stories, resembling zombie movies, seemed to depict an ominous future unrelated to reality. Could it be imagined that the leaders hadn’t taken these risks into account when making decisions?...”

“The disappearance of the feeling of fear led to the loss of empathy. This directly contributed to the increase in war crimes and atrocities against civilians behind the front lines. Soldiers suffered from severe depression during the withdrawal phase of the pills. The sudden waves of suicides in the Nazi army were due to the withdrawal of these pills. Because these pills were presented to soldiers at the front as "food supplements," no one thought they would become addicted. However, addiction developed very quickly.

“Because the substances completely suppressed appetite, soldiers couldn't eat for days. This weakened their immune systems; soldiers began to die from simple infections or exhaustion. “Due to teeth grinding, dry mouth, and malnutrition, soldiers' teeth decayed and fell out very quickly. As their bodies became accustomed to the drug, they had to increase the dose to achieve the same effect. This led to drug crises at the front and drug theft along logistical lines.”

“When the war ended in 1945, hundreds of thousands of veterans returning home from both sides were actually heavy drug addicts. West Germany and East Germany continued to use leftover Pervitin stockpiles from the army as prescription

drugs for decades after the war. Similarly, American and British veterans had to struggle with amphetamine addiction for many years.

Isn't the horror of war, which we thought we had managed to remove from life through novels, films, and textbooks, an arena where the darkest sides of the human soul are revealed? Moreover, we have become so accustomed to it that we still continue to live it as a part of life. However, our topic was drugs, and our elderly professor continued his lesson.

“In fact, it was discovered accidentally as a result of a laboratory accident in 1938. LSD, discovered in the 1960s, was influenced by hippie culture, psychotherapy and It became the symbol of the famous "Flower Children" movement.

“Some of the tragedies of the past, such as cocaine drinks or morphine derivatives, stemmed from the inadequacy of science and ignorance at the time. However, today, the drug trade is carried out with complete knowledge, will, and organized malice.

“For thousands of years, drugs were the monopoly of healers, religious figures, shamans, and even pharmacists. However, their global prohibition in the early 20th century completely changed the history of drugs, making them the main lifeline of organized crime. Furthermore, the drug trade has evolved from being merely organized crime to a global geopolitical force that holds the economies, armies, and politics of states hostage.”

Now that he's finished with the history, it's time for the moral of the story. I didn't want the 'spectator's point of view' he instilled in us. It's as if, a depiction of a world, colorful or colorless, isn't also a depiction of the life we will passively live within it. Or am I mistaken?...

“At parent-teacher meetings in schools, one of the sensitive and delicate aspects of the profession is being able to convey to parents the situation of their children in the classroom. You know, ‘to the crow, its offspring is beautiful.’ Faced with the incomprehensible, one first freezes in astonishment, then finds no words to say, and falls silent. Because the order that the mind is accustomed to cannot build a bridge between "the child I know" and "the news I heard"; it seems as if the two cannot be real at the same time. One has neither the strength to deny it, nor to accept it. One only says "it cannot be," repeatedly, as if the truth will retreat with each repetition. But the truth does not retreat; it only weighs down on one with the weight of what has not been seen, heard, or noticed.”

At this point in his speech, my eyes instinctively fell upon our new friend. There was a blank expression in his gaze toward our elderly professor, unlike the others. He, however, had embarked on a path of stereotyping the story, making individual tragedies invisible, and seemed to have chosen a blindness that sought to remove them from our lives. He continued his speech in a realm where we couldn't discern whether the ambiguous expressions he had interspersed throughout his words corresponded to real-life stories.

“When they learn that their child is a drug addict, they simply cannot comprehend it. This feeling of impossibility falls like a veil over the truth. An invisible void, a silent scream, seeps through the walls of the house. The distant look in the child's eyes invalidates all the parents' truths; it foretells a story unfolding elsewhere in life, in another darkness.

“They think they have never withheld love or material resources from him. But what they overlook is that the child needs not material abundance, but simply a haven where he can make his voice heard, where he can be listened to without judgment. While they think they are perfect parents, they have failed to notice the deep loneliness and emptiness within their child.

They are trapped in their own routines to the point that they cannot perceive that silent detachment, the gradual fading of the light in the child's eyes."

"The first and most rigid stage of the tragedy is the instinct to protect that bubble at all costs. They try to rationalize the tragedy by blaming the system, their circle of friends, or outsiders to protect their comfort zones and their image of a "perfect family." Instead of facing the searing coldness of reality, they try to fortify the walls of their sterile world by looking for the blame outside. Because admitting that their children are stuck in a quagmire means the collapse of the perfect life illusion they have built.

"Instead of grasping the magnitude of the tragedy they are in, they prefer to take refuge in the sterile and comfortable blindness of blaming others. Because there is no room for cracks in that fortress; even if the fortress collapses, the blame will always be on those outside.

"The father's aimless anger, the mother's complete paralysis at not knowing what to do, does not contribute to solving the problem.

After that day, I never saw our new friend again. When I asked about him to some friends, they said he had been transferred out of the city and didn't go into detail. I didn't press the issue, but I couldn't help myself. "Were their children problematic?" The other brushed it off. "Whose children aren't problematic?!"